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Hampton Sketches

The Woodman

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THE WOODMAN

BY E. L. CHICHESTER

"The Indian is not a lazy man, but he does need to be provided with proper channels for his energies, and incentives for their use." F. E. Leupp.

THERE are people living in Syracuse who remember Joseph Lion well. He was an Onondaga Indian and worked at the carpenter's trade.

To most white people Joseph seemed commonplace enough. Absorbed, taciturn, and rather gloomy, we can picture him clad in white man's clothes, and work clothes at that, that fitted him in the pitiful, second-hand fashion that the garments of civilization fit the red man. But it would take an eloquent pen indeed to describe the emotions that seethed in his soul. The swarthy, expressionless face masked the memories of a great past in which the man lived his real life.

The Iroquois had possessed and ruled where the people of Syracuse had their homes, and the Onondagas, the council tribe of the Six Nations, had made peace and declared war in their Council House centuries before the Town Hall was thought of.

Joseph, edging through the crowd on his way to his cabin on the reservation, at the close of his day's work, lost himself in these dreams of the past, and when he had shed his hated overalls and dressed in the costume of his people he was another being.

The man was a pagan Indian and smoked his pipe in solemn conclave, or hopped about in the ecstacy of the dance within sound of the bell of the Old Valley Church. All this was barbarous and meaningless to white people when it was not actually sacrilegious, but little did the average Christian missionary of that day appreciate the sound moral principles that found expression in Joseph's guttural speech, or realize that there was a character in the man that commanded the respect of the Indian boys who looked up to him, standing in his buckskin and feathers, from where they squatted on the floor of the Council House.

One of these boys was Joseph's grandson, little Hohs-qua-sa-ga-da, which means, in the Indian language, "the man with the ax on his shoulder," or "the Woodman." In the boy the saddened heart of Joseph found some solace, and he cherished the hope that the solemn

meaning of the dance would be observed by him, and the memories and traditions of the past greatness of his people be kept alive in his person.

He taught the little Woodman from his full store of Indian tradition and ethics, and warned him with gloomy threats against the white man and all his ways; especially, so Joseph told him, was he to shun the printed book, for evil for the Indian, and evil only, was to be found there. A devil, he declared, lurked between its covers.

Joseph died among the very last of the old regimé, and with him went out, not only his store of memories of a past greatness and power, but most of the reverence that invested the Indian ceremonies, and all that was edifying and inspiring in them.

The Woodman, an orphan, was taken into the family of relatives. They were reservation Indians with all that that implied of ignorance, poverty, and maladjustment to the life and interests of this great and properous country. With children of their own and b a r e l y enough to feed them, the outlook for this extra little Indian was a sad one.

He used to sit on his bench against

the wall while the family partook of its meal, and was allowed to approach the table and help himself to anything that was left after the others were through. It makes one's heart ache to think of the hollow-eyed, stoical little fellow, with his empty stomach and timid spirit. People think of Indians as fierce, and forget that they are wild by nature and share the fears of all wild things.

After a season of this life Providence interfered in the Woodman's case in the person of a lady missionary. This woman found a white farmer with a kind wife and a bountiful table, and got the poor, half-starved little Woodman into their home.

There were small girls in the family who were kind to him, and taught him to speak English and something of reading and writing as well. He did not forget his grandfather's teaching. The memory of the grave, earnest face of Joseph Lion commanded his reverence, but the fear of the white man's influence was lessened among these friends, and a curiosity to find and see, with his own eyes, the devil that lurked in the printed book gave a kind of wicked zest to his studies.

After a year or two, through the influence of the same good woman who had found him his home on a farm, the Woodman was sent to Hampton Institute in Virginia. It was supposed that the Government would help him here, but Uncle Sam, who makes an annual appropriation for his red children sent to this school, looked askance at a youth with a Central New York address. No Indian surely could be found in the midst of this civilized Empire State—that is, not one who was Indian enough to draw public moneys—and the fact that the youth in question was the grandson of an Onondaga chief, that his ancestors had never voted, that he made his wants known in the English tongue with difficulty, and that he regarded white people and their ways with ill-concealed fear, weighed not a whit in giving him his standing as a nation's ward.

If he stayed at Hampton he must remain on the footing of the Negro students and earn his own keep while he carried on his studies. It was hard, but it was this or return to the hardships and uncertainties of life on the reservation, so he entered on his work

year, a year with long hours and steady toil, with much of the spirit of a galley slave.

How impossible it is for a white man to understand the contempt with which an old-time Indian regards work! For a free man to voluntarily devote his waking hours to toil is quite beyond the Indian's power to conceive. This attitude toward work was bred in the Woodman's bone, but Hampton holds the secret of joy in toil, if it is held anywhere, and the Woodman, now grown to be a tall youth in his early twenties, actually came to like the life with its long hours and constantly stimulated pride in accomplishment. He came to perceive, with more and more distinctness, what it was that interested the white man in his, to the Indian, singular manner of life. He chose the machinist's trade and in three years gained a degree of skill that enabled him to find work outside. Then he went back to the neighborhood of his home and entered a railroad shop, where he built locomotives.

Picture him at this time—tall, silent, and pre-occupied, but with a smile that lighted his whole face and won the interest and sympathy of the veriest

stranger. He had marked Indian features and eyes that, like his grandfather's, seemed to see things beyond the task in hand,but this, in the Woodman's case, was only seeming; for though he remembered the traditions of the reservation, and his own childhood experiences and impressions in the Council House, these were but dim memories, and the demands of his trade and the friends and interests of the active life he was living, satisfied him.

The Woodman, in his thoughts and pursuits, had become a white man; but back of it all was race consciousness; and the school that had trained him had impressed him with a sense of a peculiar responsibility to his people. This showed in an interesting way after he had been for some time in the shop. The men proposed his name as a member of their Union. He thought the matter over with care and finally consented to join *as an Indian*. The members demurred, but he was firm, and they took him in on a basis that left the door open to others of his race.

Seventeen years the man followed his trade in this shop; he was not satisfied to do ordinary work, but studied and

practised till his product ranked with the best. Later he would speak of the delight he took in this work, the delight incident to a growing comprehension and the increased respect of his fellow workmen. He had acquired what General Armstrong used to call "the work habit."

Now he went back to Hampton and assisted in the machine shop there. He was again thrown with his people—the Sioux, the Crows, the Navahoes, the Apaches, and the pauperized reservation Indians of the East. He did not classify these people—the Woodman's mind was not at all of this order. He simply liked folks, and fraternized with the children of the red race—his folks curious, suspicious youths—they were playing at the white man's work. The Woodman knew just how they felt. Had he not been there himself? The call of the wild was in their blood. Time—three, four, five years—more time, and still more, was needed to drill hand and mind to the white man's task and give the things that interested him a chance to interest them. How patiently the Woodman worked with them! How well he understood!

Visitors would ask him, with unbelief in their tones, if he could make these fellows work. He fairly beamed as he answered, reminding them of the background of these youths, and assuring them they would all come out well if one only understood and had patience. To meet him in the shop at Hampton was a lesson on the proper attitude of the strong toward the weak, not easily forgotten.

He had land on his reservation and returned, in time, to identify himself with the Indians of his tribe. One after another of the boys here came under his influence and was persuaded to learn a trade. One after another drew out of a condition of dependence and dread, and tasted the freedom and power that come to the man who knows how. The Woodman himself secured a steady job in one of the machine shops in Syracuse. Here you meet him, dressed in his working clothes, and threading his way through the crowds in the steeet after his day's work, as his grandfather did before him; but whereas poor Joseph Lion dreamed embittered dreams and felt himself the victim of untoward circumstances, his grandson has con-

quered where he was overcome, and looks forward, where Joseph dwelt only on the past.

The Woodman is a Christian but he is not a preacher; that is, he does not talk easily in public. The English language, even, he does not speak as if it were his mother tongue, but he is a doer of the word. Only those in his confidence know with what interest he watches the growth of his brother. How will this Indian boy whom the Woodman carries on his heart, come out? Shy, taciturn, questioning, he may break on the rocks that wreck civilized as well as uncivilized man, but he is rescued from the dry rot, the dependence, the utter hopelessness of the reservation Indian. He is a living, integral unit of the land in which he was born. For better or for worse he is one of us.